Autumn selah| Poems

Mark Daniel Bennion

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Autumn Selah

Poems

by

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MANKATO POETRY REVIEW: Elegy for Brian

MIDWEST POETRY REVIEW: Resignation Rant

TAILWIND: Speechless

CAMAS: THE NATURE OF THE WEST: Beneath the Falls

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# Table of Contents

The Dark Room  

## I. Madison

- Dar al Luz  
- What My Brother Wished He Could Tell Our Parents  
- Our Only Summer in Black Earth, Wisconsin  
- Still-Life  
- Spring Crossing  
- Elegy for Brian  
- My Brother was Buried Wearing a Red Jacket  
- After the Funeral  
- My Mother, Trying to Run  
- White Sheen  
- Resignation Rant  

## II. Husks

- Pearl Helen Rosquist  
- Football Practice  
- Sweetness  
- Always a Basketball Player  
- Grass  
- Riding On  
- On the Anniversary of Your Death  

## III. Salt

- On the Edge of It  
- Speechless  
- Autumn Selah  
- Hardware Hymn  
- Arrival  
- Pioneer Dream  
- Signs in the Autumn Sky  

## IV. Tabernacle

- Leaving for Zion  
- The Night Before My Baptism  
- Beneath the Falls  
- After Ten Years Gone  
- Destination  
- Fighting Back  
- What I Want to Know  
- Back in the Dark Room  
- Joseph Smith  

Epilogue  

ii
The Dark Room

I sit here in the dark room.
It is so silent
It makes me think
I rest at the base of a maple tree.
I turn the music on
A little ways
And lie down like a dead bird.
All the colors start to change.
I. Madison

For you, Forsythia.
--Lyn Hejinian, My Life

Who can know what lies hidden in a beginning?
--Dennis Rasmussen, The Lord's Question
Dar al Luz

It is not the beginning,
she thinks before rolling up
out of bed without inhaling too quickly
so pressure won’t break the water in her stomach;
it’s not the morning kicks
pushing after nine months of punishing.
She’s thought of this, off and on,
since those teenage years
when she picked up a copy
of the leather book in a living room
and two sisters in navy skirts shared the words--

preexistence, antemortal--
that swung in the evening patter,
lighting up their angled grins.
But the life swells within,
and she focuses all knee-bending efforts,
these weeks, waiting
in the doctor’s office for the end

of bladder scrunching
that must be down the hall,
in one of the white gowns,
and she finds herself in the wrinkled sheets,
turns with a roar
to the half-smile on the doctor’s face.

There she goes,

wiping her hands, slapping her husband’s cheek,
her mind funnels down unclamped chambers
to the moment when she knows and feels
the base of a vast mountain,
and below it a valley wallows in starlight.

Close as it looms,
she knows that now
this fetus has once been pure maple
for years on top of that mountain
in fog and clouds, having

(no stanza break)
come from the edge of rocks
where hosts of the unborn alight
and the sugar that shapes him
is thicker than a few drops,
thicker than trees’ gum,
and he’s waited there, collecting sticks,
laughing with travelers from the paved streets
until one day the jokes are dull enough
to leave behind and forget.

Narrow as the chamber is,
she looks to him,
seizes on the seconds of breaking
and this time the cramps in her legs
shoot up. It is limb death,
the bones and muscles she’s known all her life
going out
to the pulse and throttle, the idea
her body slid down the mountain,
swam from the creeks, from the gold
below the grass and dirt she’s still finding ways
to reconcile with.

He drops
and spreads, rubs raw the hunkering walls,
dives into the river,
makes out a message in holler and claws,
as if his sounds could carry new language
to her mind; and the mountain is close
to the most dangerous and beautiful thing
she’s ever heard of. Then she thinks
and barely sees that the sun is rising
above that mountain, where others
may care to go with her or abandon her,

and wondering, as she does,
that the time may never come again
for this strain of light, and wind rushes
like a train in her gut, she grabs the bedrail,
tries to open the latch on a gate, then climbs

(no stanza break)
and descends with her son's new face.
Hospital lights shine with more power
than they possess and keep flickering back
the divide, the cliffs, the trees.
What My Brother Wished He Could Tell Our Parents

I came into your arms dying green
in late summer, in hidden aches,
the red squirrels silent in the trees.
Lake Mendota lapped along Madison’s shores,
layered yellow in the drifting sun,
grew steadfast in gurgle.

Leaves had already loosened; Grass tucked under
the football’s thump. I watched
the lips of Frisbees, the shoes

of brothers; I nodded
towards the lifeguard cleaning his chair:
his hands smooth as olive wood,
the soft footsteps in sand,
no desire to give punishment,
a throat I could hear
calling me from the crowd.

He slowly tells you,
each brother and sister
of the circle inside, the emblem
of mercy rising to speak.

I tumbled between curd and shadow,
a mind concealed but pure.
I was ready to elbow into those days,
to not hesitate longer, having arrived
for an autumn’s time
of pivot and wonder.
The waves whisked me out
before others had time to question.
Now I bob in the lake’s purl
until the spreading cloth of dawn.
Our Only Summer in Black Earth, Wisconsin

It was all skinned knees.
The garden mound was a leaning
tower, a hill for just one warrior,

or we wrestled, hungry among the acorns
and mushrooms, wet in the mosquito night.
We sprawled and knew the porch
was a diving board to the grass.

Our olive skin
slept for sunrise and hide-n-go seek,
harbored “Where the Wild Things Are” yearning
for forest monsters, shimmer of streams,
tied shoelaces, and pine cones.

We fed on the blue fire of moonlight,
the gutsy tackling under the stars.
Grass sinews bound us
to the fleshy roots of the oaks.

When the red humidity shook,
we dreamt of tombstones, the earth’s
cavities filling themselves with the wind and law.

Then
it was as easy as falling off a bike.
Now it is only thinking
about a lost house, counting each brick of it
one at a time, counting
for a moment
beautiful stained shirts.
Still-Life

At dusk we lived for dizziness,
a quick roll down the backyard slope--
two droplets racing down a slide--
spinning past the jungle gym,
eyes catching the sun in chain links.
In the slight drop of temperature
our minds dipped certain and sly.
Our bodies grew like garden corn:
his white kernels and shuck,
dandelion hair rising
beyond my reach, and in each turn

not seeing how the dogs paced the yard
next door or how the Lily sisters
coughed at our tumble--their tongues yellow
in raspy throats. Brian and I kept

swimming the grass, the long sloped
fairway where we hollered and bobbed
above limp swings, bounced
in the crop dust air--snapping
the breath of fireflies, somersaulting
as the night dunked the sun.
Spring Crossing

May rises, a harmless weed, 
it’s green spindle trembling 
in the cracks and spurs of clods. 
It’s the morning before daylight 
bends to fog moving its hand 
over the valley. It’s the time blue jays 
flood the northern trees, pressing down 
the young branches, the green buds.

This is the moment of strewn seeds: 
kernels unraveling in the earth 
as they touch the iron in soil 
and give up spareness and shelf, 
until they anchor for the first time 
and sprout toward the day’s thin glass.

You walk across a bridge, 
mind suckled with the lift of grape juice 
and candy, ambling towards a blinking light-- 
red flicker at a four-way stop.

Yet I only sense 
you traipsing lightly, and your tan habit, 
and how your cheeks attract the rain.

What should you gather above 
this rising river? How should you move 
if your body is between sunshine 
and snow? You look back to winter, 
the reeling mercy, the January sheen 
inside the torrent and chill.

I hear your circus of flesh: 
a unicycle down the road, tiger splash 
into spring, while up in the thunder 
this moment pares down, tramples 
what doesn’t resist, and there you run 
to greet an unknown face, 
just beyond me, shedding

(no stanza break)
your green overalls and brown curls,
just beyond me, dropping
Elegy for Brian

My brother stepped into the ground when dark was a swath above the dawn and our small room was losing heat. I woke to crickets spitting loud and glanced across the room to see his body curved like balustered iron. The blankets and sheets, once crinkled and torn, lay stiff against his hip. I whispered, "Brian, let’s go down and watch cartoons." I thought he moved as I climbed out of sleep’s stagger, but didn’t know he had slipped under the rise of earth’s morning before his mind could understand the difference between tree and three. I tried to touch the arch in his back. I spoke again. My voice was caught near the edge of weather and thickets. I knew he would wake at the end of a minute, and so I turned to walk downstairs. My face was cold as cellar brick. I felt the rail hang low in the dawn’s glare.
My Brother was Buried Wearing a Red Jacket

Walking up to the coffin
(a little larger than a viola case),
I see his jacket lying stiff
as baseball card gum.

Compact, vermilion. I take the thick cloth
in my hands and touch the fake gold
of buttons above the navel and wrists;
swirls of new pennies, video game tokens
beaming.

But a tan smear on the collar,
lint small as desert sand leaves no smile
for the undertaker. Bulging coat pockets.
Mannequin smell. Cuffs slightly askew.
Wrist white as the skull of Yorick. Hearing
the gravedigger sneeze, I wait

for the culpable thing. All those Sundays
I should have noticed the red dye,
the fuzz clinging to his turtleneck,
Mom's lipstick running down his jaw,

And what should I say of the wool
in his jacket, the lamb bleating there,
nose down and grazing? Each minute
he grows fatter, chews grass
near the side of a road.
After the Funeral

I tear in pieces my flapping lapel (though the smell of carnation lasts for days), quickly build pulpits and sew handkerchiefs, open the coffin lid on an unexpected night, numb in the make-up and flood. I am counted with them that go down into the pit. I lose my eyes between hugs and bleeding voices yet feel for signs of the grave’s rust. Non-stop silence—the same desert after the first informing phone call—disrobes me, cuts across my back with rose thorns and mortician pipes, falls like a chandelier that never breaks. The double-breasted suit, the beating boutonniere, the socks that slide down exposing skin: to all these I give in, with these I will read the obituary page. The toughest thing is to wheel the coffin out the chapel’s stone doors, to heft it over uneven ground without shading the eyes, to set it down as if it were luggage, mortar, or mulch. To drop it into the hardware light—this flare that won’t stop burning, this flare that makes traffic move at a worm’s pace.
My Mother, Trying to Run

Brian's appetite looms like Elijah's
at the Passover table. His overalls
hanging from the clothesline
make no sound in the humid air. Every night

I thumb through more photo albums, the tips
of the black and whites slowly yellow:
the terrifying comet in the evening dark.
I ask my husband not to clean the garage

just yet, and the nod I take from him
helps me out. I miss walking in parks
without sunglasses and a face without congestion,
I wish for antelope eyes in the fields

and light. There is the garden to irrigate,
a forsythia to plant. The vacations are good
for a while, but there's always the undusted rooms,
the tree branches touching the windows.

My sons tell me not to wake them so soon.
I rub their shoulders, clip gum
from their hair. When they don't talk about him,
I hear a language too hard to learn.

I speak enough and still do the sewing.
Pillows and pants contain patches.
Shirts and socks are reduced to rags.
Today it's a store clerk, tomorrow

it's the landfill office. I really don't care
who wants to know; I'm ready for leading questions.
Each time I put sheets on a bed, I know
what threads to hide, what cotton to leave out.
White Sheen

When I arose from my dream,  
there he was, just as bright  

as a newly painted room, not yet as high  
as the garage door he always tried to open,  

smiling with perspiration, beads like clear  
jelly beans. Such walls coming between us  

and no floor holding his feet. The picture leaned  
wide for an instant as he pointed to a green kite  

ready for the April sky. His talc hands  
kept opening, a spore, and I was turning,  

reeling to follow him onto a transparent cliff.  
I saw him pick up a ball in our room  

after I tried to speak. He lifted his hand  
then faded from the door.
Resignation Rant

A three-year-old boy went to bed last night. This morning he’s stiffer than a dry dishrag, stomach distended, lacquer-eyed, the sheets strewn with damp hair and a pint of drool. Whose shoulder bears the open flame? Someone who left the cap off aspirin?

I shouldn’t ask these questions, I should just pick up frozen bodies, right? But, tell me: I’ve sliced open the dead for the past thirty years. I’ve spent fierce light sticking my hands in guts, sewn eyelids so there’s no doubt they’ll arc and stay shut, sung to the lost because I think they’ll rise up.

I’ve kept their secrets and yours. I’ve pulled a farmer out of a hay bailer, culled a teacher from school ashes, played Gone, Gone, Gone for a Gershwin addict. Why do we long for incense? for scissors? for a stare from the cold?

Notice the maroon in the boy’s ears, the bold birthmark turned blue above his eye. What song snatched from the valley! I’ve never known a face to linger so long and prevent me so from sleep. Just once I want him to look me in the eyes, burn the gurney, and leave this place.
II. Husks

The flesh is the spirit thickened.

—Richard Selzer, Letters to a Young Doctor
Pearl Helen Rosquist

Her hips swing
   with a dying pendulum’s grace
      as she lifts plastic bags
from street corners,
   waddles against
      the sun’s descent.
Her body’s gears
   propel her from parks
      to carports. She charts
the gravel roads
   by the cans she picks up.
         Fingers, swollen from dog bites,
cling to unhooked steering-wheels,
          stained by fiberglass
               and oil;
the big knuckles,
   cracked pink and raw,
      move to the slightest
edge of barrow pits.
   Sometimes she speaks
      of what her three ex-husbands
gathered: honey,
         dictionaries, trampolines
              from the Badlands
and Florida swamps.
   The push of hormones was their gift.
      They worshipped junk bonds
and bets--
   leaving a family to grind
      after they’d gone.
She hauls long light bulbs
   at dusk,
      slimy among the leaves,
her quick sweep of mulch
   into the dump’s burning,
         a truck’s last sputter,
the rust.
   Her husbands return in lantern light,
      spinning for children, meatloaf,
(nearly stanza break)
until they ramble
    through excuse, and re-excuse.
    Their hard heads she knocks against.
She juggles their pain, then spits
    as it echoes--a heart
    out of a wild hive.
Football Practice

My brothers warned me about practicing twice-a-day in August. All July
I slept from dawn to noon.
Their voices called down to my room:

*Lift weights!* *Swim laps.* *Go clean the garage.*
Their knowledge was a sandpaper kiss.
One morning before light scorched mist
from the horizon, they woke me,
flinging the door open, denting the wall,
*Time to go.* I groveled out of the sack
and rode my bike to the field
with their cleats around my neck.

I found a helmet that was almost snug,
then picked up pants still green
from the last season’s stain. My buddies
and I dressed in the throb of dawn.

On the field we ran sweeps
across the fifty-yard line and wiped sweat
on the palms of each others’ hands.
I kept hearing my brothers

growl through my mouthguard.
I knew that they could throw the ball
the length of twenty cars. My breathing
revealed my workless summer.

Dry air sucked vapor from my body.
My missed blocks turned to sprints
as my friends hurdled trash cans,
charged a fountain like the Gadarene herd.

I chewed water out of a blade of grass.
The water boys laughed. Not even
a cold shower could stop my sweating.
Coach’s voice burned like fat on a grill,
Show up tonight by six o'clock.
I cycled through muscle spasms that raked from groin to ankle. Sweat burrowed in my eye, stung the left side of my face.

I kept hoping my brothers wouldn’t be home. I kept hoping my arms wouldn’t shake. When I stumbled through the screen door, I knocked over the ironing board

and sprawled across the laundry room tile. I couldn’t hear the swamp cooler’s grind, nor feel my brothers’ hands as they pulled me up off the floor.
Sweetness

for Walter Payton 1954-1999

October sun knocks against the ice.
Lake Michigan pushes back the freeze.
Soldier Field salutes a quiet change
of clothes, ham strings, jersey 34.
Chilly autumns stifle the gray-aired screams,
and benches go unused
like Candlestick Park. I gaze

into replays of his outstretched hand
and watch his smile tug at the light,
shiny toothed and lingering,
on a thinning jaw
that barely trembles the yellow in his eyes.
He presses his hand into our forearms
like a runner passing the baton.

I wonder why no lineman
could hold him down
for more than three seconds—
such quarter weight, shot gun bead,
tires spurning. How easy it is
to watch the memory and not life. On TV
I watch a fan shouting: Win a game for Walter.
I want to promise I’ll play that way,
I want to promise I’ll run
toward the goal line substance
where the game is more than just a quick block
and swivel hips. In my front yard
I pick up a white head band and slippery leaf.
My body straddles the Midway.
My mind rises in the autumn air.
Always a Basketball Player

I dream of the baseline, the backdoor opening like a fairy tale
where shots, so high and arcing,

lift the crowd from the floor faster than a miscalled charge.
I feel the ball leave the right hand,

the smudge on the backboard responsible for missed lay-ups,
and one-handed steals, believable

except in games when one’s muscles are all pine tar and wood
from the curfew broken the night before.

I watch an elbow split the rib of a friend so hard
his face goes igloo on the court,

but he gets up anyway, exhales,
Give me the ball. What pleasure
to see him rise from his knees

for another shot, for the long, slim reach.
Yet it’s the pass I want to throw myself forever, the bounce behind the back--

alive in the sense of help, the sheen, the smile that brings
a swagger to the lips, the quick brag

that leads to slides, to suntans glowing all winter, and the hard wood shine

and fans shouting let loose memory’s throne, the rebounding notoriety.
Grass

Merges with the squirrel’s grin.
Wisps of it in teeth. Rises from crew cut
to reveal ponytail,
then waves in the wind,

claims, “This is how we do it. This is how
we return.” Bows as if to make stronger.
Bows again as if on stage.
A blade, a blade, a blade--
each one, child or convict, rearing up.

Spindle after spindle points the way,
or the unseen dog trips
the postman, silent, sneers on.
Crowded, yet defers to dandelion’s curls.
Lifts weeds to sky. Nostril ping.

Going to dew. Available: its beard
of loam, its spinal fluid, the swelter
that wears it down. Stolid, stealthy,
or stammering. The soft spin
of a badminton net . . . all the routine.

Again; surging, tickle on the neck,
prayer that stains the knees. The night
crawlers underneath.
The flare of end zone comatose in winter.
Sunbathers offered to the light.
Riding On

You hang off the tricycle
not caring if the wind pushes into you
or you push into the wind. You only think
about the ride down the block
and the way you dodge between trash cans
becoming the motion of bumps and lifts.

Your shoes catch in the spokes,
and squeals bob

Mark, come!

the length of Walnut Street.
What are you riding from, what is this neighborhood
I’ll never leave?

Along the sidewalks there are signs
of accidents: the cracked squares,
the gutters plugged with bumper chrome,
the curbside addresses fading.

I watch the pedals scrape your calves,
the raw skin of joy. The elements
of dusk filter through the trees
though we don’t worry whether street lights
will turn on before dark
or where we should go
to find the softest grass to land in.

My brother, you keep circling on.
Your trike crashes into the porch;
you bounce up without nerves,
cough and look for food.
You know how to knuckle-up
out of the dirt and show-off stains.
Sometimes I see you on the edge of being tired,
tripping through the back door, handlebar grip
in your hands, tongue thrashing, ready for rest
yet then extending, Not done. One more. One more.
On the Anniversary of Your Death

Dear Brian,

When people ask how many siblings I have, I stew over three and camp near four. Either way, I keep the nest close, shield your three years from the outside: especially the time when your feet, heavy with caked mud and the bite of May tripped in dew as you ran past the lifeguard and broken bottles, beyond the gnats whining above. You scared the ducks in green fever, rolled in the churning of wet ground. Mormon mothers carried you from the air of an empty swing as your jungle grin turned lean in sandbag cheeks. How dripping and taut the echoes. How ragged the stars. If a gravedigger comes shoveling in the valley, I try to sweep by. But don’t get me wrong! Though I mean to share your name with the skipping stones, the spin above water always dives again. Brother, come run the park if you misunderstand. Ring my neck with your pudgy hands. I see your fingers swell like worms after a heavy rain. My heart is beating; kiss it better.

Love, Mark
III. Salt

Death in us goes on

testing the wild
chance of living
as Adam chanced it... .

--Denise Levertov, "Another Spring"
On the Edge of It

At nineteen, on the rise
of friendship with my parents,
I walked beside a body
of water. I saw it. It wasn’t
the first time, but I saw it,
the waves coming close in the evening.
Mom stood at the bathroom sink,
hair fell from the crown
of her head, clumping in the drain.
She slumped at the dinner table,
her soup a glassy lake, the corn
like kidney stones. I was nineteen.
I said, *You must eat.*

I left home and fled
to the world’s edge. I imagined
her when I met a man
with a mushroom growing
on his neck, a purple spot stuck
to his left temple. His eyes kept
watering. He ran a finger
over my name tag, stroked
my white shirt. His palms
were the color of lye. But I
was blind then and preached,
*Rain will fall on the highest streets
in July and December. All gutters
will splash water and weeds.*
And I moved on.

It is raining and I see her
at the kitchen table. I write
a letter to ask her forgiveness.
I write with an iron pen.
Mom leans over
eating tomatoes and lettuce.
A mushmelon is sliced open.
I watch her tossing up a wish,
searching for the balance

(no stanza break)
of a different beginning, but she knows her weight. She cleans her hands, hides her strange breath.

When Mom suggests we go swimming, we head straight for the ocean. She dives into the waves, but the kelp and brine drag her to the coral’s reef. I shout for the coast guard and start to wade in. I promise not to tell; she promises to reach the shore. The guard throws a life buoy close to my mother’s hands. Her body flips in the rushing tide.
Speechless

Shadows of Scott’s hands
bounce across the kitchen wall
as he teaches me Sign.

After dinner my roommate mutters out, *You remember spell your name ASL?* It’s the fifth time he’s asked me in the past two days. I snarl at my fingers and spell “M” and “A” with a teacher’s ease but can’t recall how to make “R” and “K.” I arch my fingers back into swirling configurations and then my wrist goes limp. I shrug and begin to play with the remaining rice on my plate. *Do again,* he manages. His voice sounds full of watermelon.

*Mark, why don’t study?*
*You learn fast, show others how.*
*We make large classes.*

I nod under the swift buzz of kitchen light. Scott keeps his eyes fixed on my lips. I raise my head and look past him out the window. He follows my gaze into a brick wall. I feel like the older brother trying to divert his attention so I can snatch the food off his plate. A spider makes his way out from under the table.

Scott’s been deaf ten years.
He’s studied sign for seven.
I think: *ignition.*

I hold up my pointer finger to let him know I’ll be back soon. The door knob feels greasy in my hand. I walk by some friends laughing hysterically. The ripping and snorts catch in their noses. They stoop, gripping the sweet ache and eventually succumb to the ground as I recall catch phrases and introductions.

*Mark, you play football?*
*I played three years in high school.*
*You want throw ball, now?*

I return after midnight. Scott glances at me, then resumes watching TV. The closed captioning reflects off the living room posters, blocks hard in his eyes. He mouths the rush of white words. He crosses his arms like a little child. I’m tempted to ask about the actual cause of his deafness.

(stanza break)
Mark, I wait five hours.
What you been doing all night?
Everywhere I look.

From our room comes the shaking pulse of bass rhythms. Zeppelin’s throb and assertion rattle the change and golf tees on my shelf. A quick thrust of car lights shimmies through the window and scampers away. His hands press against a speaker. Vibrations hollow out the wall.

Most nights come to this:
loam flashes, notepads reeling.
His thumbs like rockets.
Autumn Selah

Those slammed doors still play in my head
Like hymns.
Brian hollers again: *Catch me.*
How many times I chased him down,
Wrestling that burlap body,
His thin nails scratching my cheeks.

I can’t rein in this tremble of green.

Only after the grass stops growing
And the mower leans in the garage
Concealing drops of sluggish oil
And rings of cold blades,
Will I catch him inside
And slip again on the kitchen tiles
Beneath the evening bruise
Beneath the horseshoe dust.
Hardware Hymn

I stand in the torn shed of religion.
In evening's surplice, I kneel
at the altar of hammers, accept
the carpentry of priests. Lifting the blinds
from the window, I wait for the immanence.
But the open door is not a quiz.
When the crowd begins to jeer,
I rake. I kiss the shine
on wrenches and look for the east.
Arrival

When I left for Jerusalem
and the Holy Land bustle,
orthodox lions, David's zeal
for the psalm soared in me--
a hymn of praise I carried
above the Mediterranean. I spoke
Todah to the airline stewardess
and prayed facing east, head
dipping and nodding, eyes swollen
in text, quickly smiling
at my fellow passengers, breath secured,
bags stashed, tray table
tapping against my chest.

Before the plane touched down
I saw light dip in the ocean waves.
On the roads of Tel Aviv,
I flagged down a cab,
babbled out to the driver, threw
my luggage in back, nose-dived
into the car's front-seat.
My body burned as if riding
near the edge of a cliff,
and then out of the gears' staccato
the muffler roared,
and the half-rolled windows
stuck in the sweaty air,
hung like a distant horizon
streaked with water marks, tobacco,
mountain tips and shook
in the car's idle again and again.

At a red light I noticed a man
holding a sign: I lost my home
in the Intifadah.
His body swayed; his saliva
unrolled like parchment. He had
the rigid arms of a firewatcher. I wanted
to know if he was Israeli or Palestinian.

(no stanza break)
I wanted to ask him the most obvious question,  
"Have you ever been to Jerusalem before?"

I kept seeing the sign as we sped  
down the freeway. *I lost my home* . . . My heart  
moved to stone and fists, dropped quick  
to pale fingers, and imagination shut  
like a trunk, heavy,  
alone in a basement,  
---*I lost my home* . . . ---  
then it briefly opened  
before we reached the Western Wall  
and teetered near the Mount of Olives  
rolling into exhaustion and dust,  
*lost my home* . . .
Pioneer Dream

I sleep to murmur and cracked wheat.
My eyes half-open, brain rolled back,
lamp on and trimming, the mules and oxen
spin away. My tent door unfolds
onto a field of mud and lemmings.
A wind rushes forward, sifts the chaff
of my resistance. I walk on a trail
of birdseed and bone. Low clouds cover
the noon-day sun, and keep moving
over a green river, over a murky fountain
where men count hooks in their bait,
make nets out of their addictions.
Mothers call to their children,
“Reel it in. I will not lie.”
Crowds carry dice and chandeliers, shout,
Mint. Manners. Go to the building,
the building. the building.
A few friends wander in the wisps of light,
then whirl away. In the fog
I bow my head, taste salt in the air;
the voices rise, my mind pushes on.
Up ahead Mom and Dad peel fruit
in a white garden. Brian begins to speak.
The path forges among bellows
and raw meat. I recall the dust
of my wooden staircase and hear
a sandal lift from Wisconsin stone.
I gird myself against upheaval,
burrow into frontier religion.
Signs in the Autumn Sky

The synagogue of blue slips too fast
from the salmon and humus of leaves.
We stare and scatter like deer.
The stars withdraw into their coolness,
vague pistons of garnet and faith. Moons move
toward catatonic eclipse.

We harvest against early frost,
as if it were lupus, pick apricots
for our mothers, our pies,
and through October, watch baseball
tremble, disappear into phantoms we nurture,
revive--Ruth, Mazeroski, Jackson.
The clouds stiffen, pull back, dither,
and the Milky Way spins
one shot closer to the swelling flame.
The hunter and lion would drag us in.
We are confounded by dimming suns
that travel quick millenniums
to our yellow-green funnels of memory, age.

Perhaps what prepares us
is to climb fast up the nearest peaks,
look out till we see mist descend
from the autumn sky. Its warm drops
keep us from stepping off too soon
right through tornadoes and swans,
right through the dusk's gray seal.

Narrow dawn lingers, asks us
once more to pick summer blueberries
and remember finesse, how we walk
in November, the exposed battles
with snow drifts, days. We head southwest
to recover our reasons for light.
IV. Tabernacle

The dark night has given me dark eyes,
Yet I use them to search for light.

--Gu Cheng, "One Generation"
Leaving for Zion

I'm the bricklayer from Madison, the ex-con from Leeds, the cook from Gibraltar who drops a ladle to get there. We all wrestle with back streets, with yawns oozing down our sleeves, lift our first song to the unknown sage in the desert. The secret is in the displacement—home to the influential bishop, to the child on the unbaptized row.
The Night Before My Baptism

I pull the sheets away from the pillows, 
turn down the bed lamp, the blinds, 
as a thick clattering rain 
pours from the mountains and leaves its throbbing

on my roof. Thunder swells in the valley,  
lightning throws the black pulse from my room, 
a rocket flash. I think how each drop 
might scatter the loose tiles above me, rinsing

the gutters. Mulch, berries, and dead mice 
rattle eaves before they fall to the ground. 
The bed shakes me, the chatter turns to rumble 
but I slender in, grind down, and believe.
Beneath the Falls

I stand in a pool
below water falling
like shards. A humming vortex
churns mosquitoes, sticks,
dead skin, minnows, a spot
where forces coax the moss
and ducks to dip under. Rays of light
cling to the streaming water
before gravity snuffs them out.
Swift beads fly from the center;
I wade into the hazy swirling
as my shoulders bow and pull back.
The rush traces down and scatters
beyond the polished rocks, spraying
over roots, arrowheads, larkspur,
spinning the pupils of my eyes:
the gray dimming whirls over,
fans off my torso, spits edges
of iris, thistle and bark
before they slough away.
Quickly it buries me
with the bodies of lizards and stars.
After Ten Years Gone

There are no familiar spirits in this chapel, just knuckles in hymnals, children crying, new rugs. What’s avoided shoots up like bottle rockets, fans like locusts across a field of wheat.

Remembered events brush through my mind: fastings and firesides, baptisms and ground breakings. The temple white hangs starched in a collar, soft and wet in a sacrament cup. And the janitor at the pulpit, droning; his rhetoric camps out, settles on the pews, wooden and bent.

A child runs for the drinking fountain; A table--tan, clerical,-- rises over our knobby heads, rests above my dross and rubble. In the silence of communion I think of Peter weeping after he lied.
Destination

Whenever I leave,
I choke on the aftertaste of shortbread
and tear my clothes in an open field;

I drift in the dust of country stores
and make grass rise out of my cheek. It’s better
when I return like a cub to its den. It’s better

when the sky is mauve blankets.
It’s better that the bush isn’t consumed.
It’s better when I write autobiography.

My mind is the late Sabbath candle.
My temple burns with reasons to exist.
A cup of water is just within reach. I put

my hand to the plow in a field of wheat.
I weep at the color green. I taste
salt in lemon cake. I offer myself

to the ancient texts, words strong
as leviathan and robe,
words full of hammers and lamps. As soon

as they are spoken, an angel flies
with the sound of a trumpet; I will study
that air a little; I will not agitate it. I am a child

of eternal mirrors. I was born in a seal;
I breathe because of fervor, because
of the watchmen’s grace; I forget

creation has not ended. I seek for
the condition of the hat’s shelter, the mime’s
speaking shadow. I harvest olives and grapes.

I confess noonday in The Book of Mormon:
it is Joseph’s front door, it is a vial of oil, one
of the psalms in a dead man’s quiver, one child
poking through the straw and leaves.
On the eve of new knowledge, on the eve
of an open shrift, I cook husks primed

for a sheep's belly, I gurgle a cup of brack
from the Great Salt Lake; I recall that home
will diminish the moon, candles will die

in the bushel, fields will reap the dusk's glaze.
I stand with white cloth reading
Young and Smith. I look for a shortcut
to Temple Square. A stranger grabs
the back of my feet. I tell him of the sweetroll
in my stomach. I point to the vanilla

between my teeth. I say, *It's what I taste
before sleep; what I wake up to.* He says,
"It's the altar you can't forget."
Fighting Back

Mormonism is a cult.

--Fred Russell

_Cult_. This excuse for a used car salesman
Should have been a Dali painting.
_Cult;_ scratched record, wolf, ripped sandbag,
Camel hump and spit, gnat doctor,
_Cult;_ demented troll under a bridge
Gurgling pond water, and--_Cult--_striking me
With mud, _Cult_, digging and spreading
This nightmare that surfaces again
And again, _Cult_, twisting my belief
Into puppets of clay, _Cult_, dirty socks,
Byword, hiccup, erosion of light.
He throws the wrench,
You don’t believe in Jesus--_Cult--_
Grabs my collar, as if it were a leash. _Cult_.
It is a walk in torrential rain--_Cult--_
Rocks pelting, fork prongs in my calves,
Hunched over and trying to run, _Cult_,
The devil laughs, brimstone
Almost snuffs out my mind, _Cult_, the Bible
Like wax on his tongue. From his lips, _Cult_,
I see him mouth the word _Cult_.
His shoulders tighten, _Cult_,
His husky sweater lunges,
Gravel clogs his voice
And the low dunked cough,
Measured holler and speed,
Chokes in the name of worship.
Along his limbs hang two torches, _Cult_,
A desire to see me burned
From my golden book, _Cult_, the pop of force
Drives his neck veins, _Cult_, one last
Chance to hammer the sale, _Cult_,
I look him in the eye and yell,
“You should meet my six wives.”
What I Want to Know

He was caught up into paradise.
--Paul

I am a miner chipping at the earth,
see what coal I stumble upon.
You watch me with my pick

and single beam,
teeth white in the world’s abdomen.
I believe you are not far away,

distinguishable as lladro light,
talking with Lazarus about the grave’s floor.
Dead, except there are the seasons all the time.

What happened--the going to sleep, the bed’s
frame at dawn, the never waking up--
was one thing, one thing

and now you sing the quasar blue,
kneeling on the asteroid ride,
the white sky in winter, the cold water

in clay. Your body breathes dew
and bark. Some days it’s lather in my hands,
my knees, my breast. You help me

learn of the hard quartz in streams.
You push me to the earth’s spine. What you
know in your new life, I want to know in mine.
Back in the Dark Room

To wake up lying in his bed
is serene as touching the walls of a cave,
is to believe you can keep that Friday in mind
and heft Galilee on your back.
To hang up the night's smock
and oil the lamp, to see through
a cleansing tear is to step outside of a day
and allow whoever knocks on the front door
to visit you in this upstairs corner room
you call your childhood. This place
that returns today and on a Friday ten years hence,
occupied now by someone else's brother
who makes that room his windowed attic,
his foyer of the sky.
Joseph Smith

for Robert Hayden

After the pearl shines in the last country,  
a ball of spindles, an iron rod,  
a dove fashioned from gold plates  
belonging to me like skin, free as sky,  
after it brightens the unlit corners; after it is banners,  
sun, tsunami, grand canyon, undercurrent;  
after it sears the antipodes and septentrion;  
after it is more than two missionaries  
walking from door to door: a vessel, a seer,  
a primary school boy, a wrestler jailed  
in the Missouri reeds, tarred, seeing salt  
in distant mountains, in handcarts, in Zion,  
a mystic steeped in knowledge and burden,  
a translator shall speak at the bar,  
and not with the Greek toga, not with princes  
and medals and crisping pins,  
but with Jesus’ arms far extending,  
his children carrying the asp and lion,  
New Jerusalem will start to gleam.
Epilogue

Wanting to understand what You already know,
I am a rainbow seeker, adrift on gopher wood
and canteens, whose gold lies in the next fjord.
My hands and head deny quick retractions,
but not the thin limen of where You are.
Like a strip of bark hitting the waves, I bounce
and dive; my slivers slough to the ground, yet then
I rise for light and there You shadow me.